

The Portuguese and the Dutch in Southern Africa

Some Comparisons

ROBERT ROSS

(University of Leiden)

During the first decade of the Dutch East India Company's existence, it made a number of vain attempts to drive the Portuguese out of their main base in East Africa, Mozambique island. Within a few years, though, the Dutch discovered that they could reach their destinations in the East more quickly by setting a course far to the south of Madagascar. Since they no longer needed to frequent the Mozambique channel, they saw no particular reason to dislodge the Portuguese from its shores. Except for one final Dutch attempt to capture Mozambique island, in 1668, the two imperial powers kept their distance from each other, at least in Africa. The Dutch did not even know the simplest details of the political or economic situation in East Africa, while Portuguese visitors to the Dutch sphere of influence in the Cape Colony were entirely those of transients and traders, particularly in slaves. They were not competitors, and therefore were not attempting to solve the same questions. Nevertheless, the problems with which they were faced on the African mainland were analogous, so that it is possible to make comparisons between their activities.

The Dutch colony at the Cape of Good Hope and the Portuguese possessions in the Zambezi valley were the only two major areas of Africa (apart from the islands of the Atlantic from the Canaries to Sao Tomé) over which Europeans imposed their rule before the end of the eighteenth century. The societies established in the two areas differed very considerably from each other. It would therefore appear that they would provide a very clear illustration of the differences between the two imperial powers' ideologies and practices of colonialism. This is, however, only partially the case, since the distinctions which can be observed are as much the consequence of the great differences between the African societies in the hinterlands of Table Bay and the Zambezi delta during the period of colonisation as of those between Lisbon and Amsterdam, with their metropolitan and colonial extensions.

The Portuguese had been drawn into south-east Africa by the gold of the Zimbabwe plateau. Even before Vasco da Gama's voyage rumours of the gold of Monomotapa had reached European ears, and these proved an irresistible attraction to adventurers who hoped to make their fortunes out of the opportunities provided by the new power in the Indian Ocean. That the trade in gold was largely in the hands of Moslims was an incidental addition to the attractiveness of taking it over. To do so did not, however, require colonisation, or control at the point of production. The Portuguese discovered it was sufficient to set up fortified markets, known as *feiros*, to which the gold could be attracted. Nevertheless, with their frequent penchant for extending the sphere of their operations beyond that which was necessary for efficiency, the Portuguese made a number of abortive and disastrous attempts to impose their sovereignty over the Shona kingdom of Mwene Mutapa. The result, by the end of the seventeenth century, was the collapse of the Mwene Mutapa kingdom, the establishment of the Rozwi paramountcy over much of the plateau and the virtually total exclusion of the Portuguese from the rich lands to the south of the Zambezi valley, except in closely related markets. Equally, to the north, the Malawian kingdoms whose rulers had the titles of Lundu and Undi were well able to cope with any potential aggression. Neither the Rozwi nor the Undi, however, were capable of preventing Portuguese settlement in the valley between their polities, and indeed they were probably not inclined to do so. The area was peripheral to their loosely structured realms and the Portuguese presence allowed them easy access to the trading world of the Indian Ocean. Indeed, on occasion, they granted land in the valley to successful *sertanejos*, as the Portuguese frontiersmen were known.

The settlements in the Zambezi valley can also be looked at from the vantage point, not of the high ground to the north and south of the river, but from the port of Quelimane at its mouth, or from Mozambique island where the Portuguese governor had his seat. They too believed that they had the right to grant land to individual Portuguese – a category which of course always included Christian Goans. The estates so granted became known as *prazos*, held by *emprazamento*, a form of tenure which goes back to medieval Iberia, for the duration of three lives. When the third *prazero* died, title would revert to the crown. In theory the Governor was then empowered to grant the *prazo* to whomsoever he pleased, although the heir of the deceased man or woman would have the strongest claim. A quit rent was charged for the privilege of holding a *prazo*, but this was not high and the colonial government's revenue was derived much more from the customs duties it imposed at the ports than from such impositions.

The *prazeros* did not themselves directly control the production of agricultural goods on their estates. The sorghum, millet and maize which were the staples of the Zambezi valley were grown by the African peasants who were required to render tribute to the Portuguese. They were compelled to do so largely by the slave armies which provided the military base of Portuguese

rule in Zambezia. Nevertheless, that compulsion could not be too great. Peasant communities which considered that the rulers' exactions were excessive could depart, either to settle on another *prazo* or to establish themselves free of political control. In the latter case, of course, they were vulnerable to slave raiding from the *prazos* and in the former they had merely changed the individual to whom they had to pay tribute, and no doubt renegotiated the amount due. Essentially, then, there was little difference between the activities of the *prazero* and those of a protection racketeer.

Nor did the *prazeros* have full political control over their subjects. The Africans on the *prazos* considered their legitimate rulers to be the *mambos*, who were the leaders of the lineages which had a real or fabricated claim to be the first settlers in any area. The *prazeros* had to work through these local aristocrats and acquired such local legitimacy as they did by virtue of the recognition the *mambo* gave them. Indeed there were occasions when marriage alliances were concluded between the *prazero* and the family from which the *mambo* on his estate was drawn.

The system of *prazo* land tenure did not become established in the Zambezi valley until around the middle of the eighteenth century, although a number of individual *prazos* had been established somewhat earlier. It was to last until well into the nineteenth century. This does not mean, however, that particular *prazos* were continually occupied throughout the period. Many were abandoned after one or two generations, or were overrun by the forces of, in particular, the Malawian kingdoms. What survived was a model, whose concrete realisation changed with considerable frequency.

The Dutch were not drawn to colonise the Cape of Good Hope by the mineral riches of the sub-continent (although had they found them, they would undoubtedly have rejoiced). Rather they saw the Cape as an adjunct to their trading empire stretching from the Red Sea to Japan. By the mid-seventeenth century, a fleet of some twenty ships a year was already sent from the Netherlands to Asia, so that a permanent rendezvous and refreshment station at the southern tip of Africa was clearly a sensible economic proposition. The salubrious climate of the Cape, particularly in the southern summer when the ships were in port, and the plentiful fresh water flowing off Table Mountain made the settlement at what was to be known as Cape Town an ideal site for the recuperation of sailors, but it was only after a few decades that the natural advantages of the Cape were matched by the colony's ability to supply the victuals the ships needed. From around 1700, a pattern of settlement and agricultural production had been established which in general satisfied the VOC's requirement for in the first instance ships' stores, in other words wine, wheat flour and salted meat. Attempts to introduce other crops, including cotton and indigo, failed, but both the Cape's rulers and its inhabitants were satisfied with producing typical 'Mediterranean' crops to match its Mediterranean climate.

Whereas in Zambezia the Portuguese had accommodated to local African

society, at the Cape the Dutch were able to construct a radically new social order. The Khoisan of the south-west Cape were an almost entirely pastoral and hunting and gathering people before Europeans arrived. While they would teach the invaders how to pasture cattle and sheep on the dry plains and escarpments of the Cape interior, they had no agricultural tradition (except perhaps in the production of cannabis). Wheat and grapes could thus only be delivered to the VOC ships if the Dutch organised the farming of the hinterland of Cape Town themselves.

There were of course a number of positive models for the organisation of agricultural production open to the Dutch. However, the VOC did not believe that it was itself equipped to organise and run large-scale plantations, and its distrust of the private economic activities of its own employees meant that the obvious candidates to do so were also barred from doing so. On the other hand, small family farms could never have developed in a settlement which was not settled by families, as was for instance New England, but rather by the chance flotsam of a maritime empire. Instead, there developed in the south-west Cape the pattern of large farms – by the standards of British North American colonies a few might just have qualified to be considered small plantations – generally managed by the owner or a member of his or her immediate family and worked by imported slave labour. The first farms to be issued by the VOC were held in *de jure* freehold, those which were granted later, in contrast, in a variety of other tenures, which nevertheless amounted to *de facto* freehold as the Company never exercised the right which it had reserved to itself to repossess the farms.

These farms were essentially geared to producing wheat and wine for the market in Cape Town. This they were able to do with sufficient efficiency and the market grew at a sufficient rate for the agrarian sector of the Cape's economy to expand fairly continually, if not spectacularly, throughout the eighteenth century. Wheat production increased over the course of the eighteenth century from around 16,000 hectolitres to around 60,000 and wine from around 600,000 litres to three and a half million. The slave labour force of the burghers, who did most of the work on these farms, grew commensurately, from under a thousand at the beginning of the century to around 16,000 at its end, very largely as a result of slave imports. In part this growth was made possible by the development of simple but effective mechanisms of channelling credit from the richer merchant-officials in Cape Town to the farming community, which in turn allowed the latter to purchase the slaves it required to work on the expanding farms.

From around the 1720s onwards, the colonists began to conquer vast tracts of the South African interior from the Khoisan. Since transport costs precluded the marketing of bulk agrarian produce from farms which lay beyond the mountain barriers of the Cape folded belt, the new land was used to run large flocks of sheep and herds of cattle. There has been considerable debate as to the extent to which the *trekboers* who settled in the interior were still tied to the market in Cape Town. The most recent

arguments would, I think, stress on the one hand that farmers on the frontiers were in general poor in comparison to those in the south-west, and that within the frontier community there was considerable differentiation in terms of wealth between the richer and the poorer cattle and sheep owners. On the other hand, it would also be argued that virtually all white farmers in the Cape Colony maintained contacts with the Cape Town market to the best of their ability, and that, although undoubtedly a large proportion of what a household consumed was also produced within that household, the farm economies were organised in the first instance around the need to generate a cash income through sales to Cape Town.

At first sight it would appear as if these two, highly distinct, forms of settlement confirm the frequently held impression, or perhaps stereotype, of the two imperial systems, the Portuguese and the Dutch. On the one hand, the Portuguese in the Zambezi valley showed many signs of their being still subjects of a feudal kingdom. The form of land tenure which indeed gave the *prazos* their name went back to medieval Iberia. Once established, the *prazeros* maintained themselves by the basic feudal activity of extracting rent from the subservient peasantry on their estates. The record does not suggest that the *prazeros*, or any other Portuguese in Mozambique for that matter, themselves intervened directly in the agricultural production process of the Africans over whom they ruled. It was a parasitical imperialism, though of course not the less effective for being so.

The Dutch at the Cape, on the other hand, were not only ruled by the leading merchant capitalist company of the seventeenth century, but also behaved accordingly. The VOC distributed land in what was in effect, if not always in fact, freehold tenure. The men, and some women, who came to own these farms, ran them with considerable economic rationality, borrowing on the credit market and selling on the Cape Town commodity market. Whether or not they were capitalist farmers depends on the specific definition of capitalism chosen, but certainly in general they were as capitalist as any slave-owning class can be. Indeed, because managing a slave-based agricultural economy was less lucrative at the Cape than in many American colonies, for want of a tropical plantation crop, it may be that the Cape farmers were more capitalist than many other slave owners. They could not afford the airs by which plantocracies attempted to become aristocracies.

However, the argument is not quite as clean as it may seem. As in all historical comparisons, there are a variety of pollutants which prevent an unambiguous statement on the nature of the two colonialisms being made. By far the most important of these was the nature of the African society into which the two imperial powers intruded. The Portuguese always had to take cognizance of and adapt to the traditions and social organisation of the African societies of the Zambezi valley. This they did to such an extent that the inheritance of *prazos* was often along matrilineal lines and

that a number of Portuguese became fully incorporated in African society as chiefs. Indeed the resistance to the reconquest of the Zambezi valley by the Portuguese colonial forces in the first years of the twentieth century was led, among others, by the now Africanised Pereira family, chiefs of Macanga.

The Dutch were in a different, and in many ways more enviable, situation. The African population of the south-west Cape was too weak to present a major obstacle to the creation of a new society to the blueprint, more or less, of the colonisers. Rather the Khoisan were brushed aside all too easily. A century and three-quarters later, in contrast, things were different. When the descendants of the capitalist farmers of the Cape entered the Transvaal, they were confronted with a relatively densely settled African population. As a result the forms of exploitation which were created were much closer to those employed by the Portuguese than were those established in the Cape. But by then, of course, the *voortrekkers* were part of, or rather were seceding from, the British Empire, then the leader of the capitalist world, which had replaced the Dutch East India Company as the dominant imperial power in Southern Africa.

Bibliography

This article has been based on the following sources:

- I. On Mozambique:

H.H.K. Bhila, *Trade and Politics in a Shona Kingdom: the Manyika and their Portuguese and African Neighbours, 1575-1902* (Harlow 1982).

Allen F. Isaacman, *Mozambique. The Africanization of a European Institution: the Zambezi Prazos, 1750-1902* (Madison, Milwaukee and London 1972).

M.D.D. Newitt, *Portuguese Settlement on the Zambezi: Exploration, Land Tenure and Colonial Rule in East Africa* (London 1973).

Alan K. Smith, 'The Indian Ocean Zone' in: David Birmingham and Phyllis M. Martin eds., *History of Central Africa* (2 vols.; London and New York 1983) I.
- II. On the Cape:

P.C. van Duin and Robert Ross, *The Economy of the Cape Colony in the Eighteenth Century*. Intercontinenta VII (Leiden 1987).

Richard Elphick and Hermann B. Giliomee eds., *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1840* (2nd edition; Cape Town 1989).

Leonard Guelke, *The Early European Settlement in South Africa* (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis; University of Toronto 1974).

Susan Newton-King, 'Commerce and Material Culture on the Eastern Cape Frontier, 1764-1812', *Collected Seminar Papers of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London: The Societies of Southern Africa in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* 14 (1988).

Robert Ross, *Beyond the Pale: Essays on the History of Colonial South Africa* (Middletown and London, Wesleyan UP, forthcoming 1992).

Nigel Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* (Cambridge 1985).
- III. On the Dutch in East Africa:

Robert Ross ed., 'The Dutch on the Swahili Coast, 1776-1778: Two Slaving Journals', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* (1986).